

US health care workers demand strike action to address understaffing, low pay as pandemic crisis deepens

Alex Johnson

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Mass resistance among nurses and health care workers against the criminal policies of hospital conglomerates and governments is erupting across the United States under conditions in which the coronavirus pandemic is spreading uncontrolled in virtually every part of the country.

COVID-19 infections are growing in almost every state, which is leading to a staggering growth in hospitalizations that are threatening to push the nation's health care infrastructure to a breaking point. The pandemic is now entering into a third major surge, with hospitals in most states reporting more incoming patients with COVID-19 than at any point during the year.

In Indiana, state officials have reported that health care workers are feeling "exhausted" due to the sheer magnitude of coronavirus patients and are highly at risk of burnout. The state is experiencing an explosive surge in the pandemic's spread, with the total number of cases increasing by more than 200 percent between September 15 and October 25.

On Monday, Indianapolis Mayor Joe Hogsett implemented new coronavirus restrictions in the state, consisting primarily of caps on the number of patrons for restaurants, bars, night clubs and gyms. Health officials on Thursday have ordered schools in Marion County (Indianapolis) to move to virtual learning by November 30 and through January 18. These limitations will not be sufficient to slow down the spread of the virus and are proven to be ineffective compared to full lockdowns. Public health experts are warning that the flood of new cases could eclipse Indiana's "first wave" of the coronavirus and push overwhelmed and fatigued frontline hospital workers over the edge.

Indiana is facing its greatest patient load to date, which is being exacerbated by chronic understaffing. According to the state's health commissioner, the influx of patients has forced hospitals to delay elective surgeries. The Indiana Healthcare Workforce Reserve reported that it is receiving approximately five requests daily from hospitals in desperate need of staffing assistance.

In Flint, Michigan, over 1,000 nurses at the non-profit McLaren Flint Hospital were preparing to go on strike earlier this month after the nurses union and hospital management failed to reach a settlement for their labor contracts for a month. The conditions at the hospital are grim, with nurses demanding that the hospital address the severe shortage of nursing and ancillary staff. A strike was averted after the American Federation of State, County and

Municipal Employees (AFSCME) union rescinded its strike notice following a tentative agreement reached with the hospital.

The agreement reached between the AFSCME and McLaren bears all the markers of a sell-out contract that will not resolve the critical need for adequate staffing and much-needed equipment. A joint statement from the union and McLaren Flint says negotiators agreed on "better nurse-to-patient ratios, commitments to provide PPE [personal protective equipment], a better compensation package and a seat on hospital committees." The specific details of the contract have not been released, including how nurse staffing would accommodate rising patient levels, the quality of the PPE that will be doled out or the type of "compensation package" that health care workers will receive.

Michigan is lurching toward a catastrophic health crisis consuming the entire state's hospital system. Health executives from Beaumont, Henry Ford, Spectrum and health systems in the Upper Peninsula identified multiple hospitals where the positivity rate tripled. Michigan Governor Gretchen Whitmer said at a press conference that the state was in "the worst part of this pandemic to date." She told reporters that the situation facing the state is what medical experts have been "warning about and dreading since the beginning of the pandemic."

Nurses at St. Mary Medical Center in the Langhorne Borough of Bucks County, Pennsylvania, voted overwhelmingly for strike action after a year of negotiating for their first union contract. The union, the Pennsylvania Association of Staff Nurses and Allied Professionals (PASNAP), represents 775 St. Mary nurses, with 85 percent of them voting for strike authorization in late October. The strike is set to occur on November 17.

According to PASNAP, the nurses at St. Mary have been bargaining with hospital management for their first union contract since last October. Nurses at St. Mary have not been able to reach an agreement on minimum staffing levels. Nurses at the hospital have been forced to work shifts where only a handful of nurses are tasked with treating upward of 25 patients. The hospital has remained intransigent in its refusal to concede to the demands of nurses. During the last negotiation session with nurses in October, the hospital's bargaining team reportedly left "abruptly" an hour and 25 minutes early without coming any closer to an agreement.

St. Mary is a part of the Trinity Health Mid-Atlantic hospital system and is one of Trinity's most profitable hospitals, with total

patient revenue reaching more than \$1.6 billion in 2014.

Despite the authorization for a strike, nurses should harbor no illusions in PASNAP, which has made concerted efforts to suppress the emergence of a strike while having nurses work without a full contract for over a year. The union was forced to issue a vote for a strike in response to the rank-and-file opposition of nurses.

Elsewhere in Pennsylvania, the PASNAP at Mercy Fitzgerald Hospital in Delaware County reached a deal with Trinity Health System, averting a planned walkout by 260 nurses to protest unsafe staffing and improved wages. The new contract does little to nothing to ensure safer working conditions or guarantee a long-term pay increase. The union said Thursday that the new contract was designed to increase the number of nurses, but the precise number of additional staff still remains unclear. Moreover, the union agreed to a meager 3 percent annual wage increase for the first three years of the contract, which will barely keep pace with inflation levels.

The state is fast turning into a major hot spot for the spread of the COVID-19 virus. On Thursday, the state recorded 5,488 new confirmed cases within 24 hours, a new daily record. In opposition to warnings from infectious disease experts, Secretary of Health Dr. Rachel Levine said in a virtual call with the media Thursday that there are no current plans for a statewide shutdown despite the staggering rise in infections.

Pennsylvania is emerging as a major epicenter for health care worker opposition. In addition to St. Mary, more than 1,500 nurses represented by PASNAP at Einstein Medical Center and St. Christopher's Hospital for Children in Philadelphia are expected to strike in the coming weeks due to the insufferable staffing levels at both hospitals. In the union's latest press release on November 5, nurses are seeking strike action because they feel "pushed to the brink by unsafe staffing that seriously undermines patient safety."

An additional 1,000 nurses could potentially go on strike if the two hospitals fail to reach an agreement. Frontline nurses at four Philadelphia-area hospitals have taken steps toward a strike to protect their patients and themselves from the surge of COVID-19 infections.

One registered nurse at St. Christopher's told CNN that staffing was the "number one issue." In a scathing denunciation of the for-profit health care system, the nurse said: "We're in an era of health care being run by hedge fund groups. They do not care about where or how long they run as long as they make them profitable. They're not invested in these hospitals."

Although most nurses at St. Christopher's have voted to strike, the union has not provided the requisite 10-day strike notice. Maintaining the pro-corporate position of "labor-management collaboration," the union is still seeking to negotiate with Tower Health, the owner of St. Christopher's. Since buying the hospital in December of last year, Tower Health has already closed down one of the two floors at St. Christopher's allotted for less sick patients. The company has also bled staffing dry, which has led to a shortage of staff available for pediatric care.

In Ohio, approximately 125 nurses represented by the Ohio Nurses Association (ONA) at East Liverpool City Hospital are set to begin a three-day strike November 21 over staffing and

retention issues. The contract extension that nurses are operating under is set to expire at midnight November 20. The hospital has refused to address poor nurse retention and consequent staffing shortages, which have resulted in many nurses being forced to work overtime. Nurses are also demanding a revision to their wage scale to incentivize staff to work overtime. One unit in the hospital has over 14 position vacancies, which has led to poor working conditions and has worsened treatment quality for patients.

The hospital has attempted to guilt-trip nurses for deciding to strike, blaming them for launching such an action during the health care crisis caused by the pandemic. The strike itself bears the marker of a "Hollywood strike," which is purposed as a temporary procedure to let nurses blow off steam for a few days and then allow the union to continue negotiating a sellout deal with hospital management. ONA has refused to call attention to the hospital's acknowledgment that it intends to use strikebreakers to undermine the strike.

Hospital laundry workers staged a rally in lower Manhattan this week demanding their employer, Unitex, provide them with two masks a day and change working conditions to allow at least 6 feet apart between workers. Laundry workers tend to work under conditions that give ample opportunities for viral infections to spread, including cleaning soiled bed linens and gowns.

The Laundry Distribution and Food Services Workers Union has been in contract negotiations with Unitex for months, with the company repeatedly insisting that any future contract would mean a cut to workers' pensions. Union representatives, however, have made attempts to derail the strike movement growing among workers. Union representative Albert Arroyo told a local news station, "The last thing they want to do is to go on strike, that's not what they want to do, but the employer is pushing them into a strike."

In order for health care workers to advance their interests and protect their lives during this pandemic, they must break from the straitjacket imposed on them by the pro-corporate trade unions and establish their own independent organizations, rank-and-file safety committees, in hospitals and medical centers nationwide to coordinate a decisive struggle against the profit-driven capitalist system. Workers must demand that the necessary financial and industrial resources be diverted away from Wall Street and the upper echelons of the corporate oligarchy to instead be used to eradicate the pandemic by fortifying health care infrastructure and closing nonessential production while providing full income to all those unable to work.



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